

"Caserta"
Eastville Vicinity
Northampton County, Virginia

HABS No. 66-1
Va- 591

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Washington Office, Division of Design and Construction
Washington 25, D. C.

"Caserta"
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"Caserta"

Present Owner: Mr. and Mrs. Colley Cowling

Present Use: Residence

Location and Setting: Old Town Neck, Eastville Vicinity, Northampton County, Virginia.

Brief Statement

of Significance: Good example of regional character with one brick end and colonnade connecting with small unit; eccentric roofline. The high ridge marks the position of the cross hall. The house is massively proportioned, but only one room deep on the first floor. Curtailment of building plans is said to have resulted in the awkward roof. Plain interior trim.

Historical Notes: The small unit of the house may date from the late eighteenth century when the property was owned by William Haggoman. George P. Upshur bought the place in 1836 and built the house as it stands, for the most part unchanged. He and his brother, Judge Abel P. Upshur of "Vaucluse," were descended from Upshurs who settled on the Eastern Shore during the 17th century. The builder was a naval officer who served as superintendent of the Naval Academy at Annapolis.

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The name, "Caserta," was derived from the town in Italy where Upshur spent many carefree days. Alas for domestic tragedies that struck blow after blow, by 1839 depriving the young husband of infant daughter, then beloved wife and son. Commodore Upshur lost all interest in "Caserta" and disposed of it in 1847. He died in 1852 in Spezia, Italy, while there in command of the U. S. S. Levant. By government order his body was preserved in alcohol and shipped home in a metal casket for burial. His remains lie beside his wife and children in this family graveyard at "Vaucluse."

Ice House: Ice Houses are a remarkable feature of the landscape on the Eastern Shore--both conical and gable-roofed examples. That at "Caserta" is ruinous, but the accompanying photographs present essential details. The brick pit is approximately 20 feet in diameter and 12 feet deep. Doubtless the set of paneled inner doors assured good insulation qualities.

References are frequent in southern coastal newspaper of the early 19th century to the high merits and ready availability of an ice supply from Maine. Distribution of this luxury by enterprising boatmen appear to have been "big business," before the rash of mechanical inventions supplanted simple rural pursuits. As late as March 24, 1860 the columns of the Alexandria Gazette carried the following diatribe headed "Ice Cream in the Country:

"There is something so audacious in the conception of ice cream, that it is not strange that a population

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undebauched by the luxury of great cities, looks upon it with a kind of awe, and speaks of it with a certain emotion. This defiance of the seasons forcing Nature to do her work of congelation, in the face of her sultriest mood, might well inspire a timid mind with fear, lest human art were revolting against the High Powers, and raise the same scruples which resisted the use of ether and chloroform in certain contingencies."

References: Ralph T. Whitelaw, Virginia's Eastern Shore, Richmond, Virginia, Virginia Historical Society, 1951, Volume One, pp. 304-05.

Dictionary of American Biography

Prepared by: Worth Bailey, HABS National Park Service, June, 1960.

Approved:

Robert E. Smith
Acting Chief Architect

Date

1-17-61